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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF TURKMENISTAN'S FLEX OBSTRUCTION MORE
ORCHESTRATED/WIDESPREAD THAN IN PRIOR YEARS

REF: Ashgabat 1194

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) This year Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) recruitment has encountered an unprecedented level of interference and disinformation from the Ministry of Education (MOE), despite official approval of the program and host government rhetoric that the problems will be resolved. As in past years, host government interference has been directed through schools at the aspiring student participants and their families and teachers, but the scale of this year's harassment suggests a central directive by the Ministry of Education to hinder every aspect of the recruitment and testing process. Nearly all Round I and II testing is complete as of December 18; while the total number of participants (1425) is down just 0.6 percent over last year's -- already an artificially low number -- the variation between testing sites indicates the skewed demographic distribution of this year's testing pool. Charge has protested host government interference in the testing process to the MFA on a daily basis and has noted that she no longer can vouch for the integrity of the testing program. Post is strongly requesting that the government approve retesting in Turkmenabat, Ahal (Tejen and Ruhabat) and Balkanabat, the sites of the most egregious harassment, in order to re-establish the integrity of the selection process. End Summary.

FLEX RECRUITMENT UNDER COORDINATED ASSAULT

¶2. (U) The FLEX recruitment process consists of three rounds of tests, with the first a basic test of English. Those who pass Round I are invited to Round II, a mock Test of English as a Foreign Language. Once Round II results are returned in 4-5 weeks, high scoring candidates are invited to Round III, which includes a more detailed application and interview process. The only documents a student needs for admittance to the testing site are a birth certificate (a copy is fine initially) and a photograph. The host government's tactics to hinder the testing process this year included, but were not limited to, the following:

-- Telling students that being a Turkmen speaker and having a recommendation letter from one's school/teacher were requirements for taking the FLEX test.

-- Attempting to screen students for Turkmen language and/or recommendation letters at the testing site and attempting to bar entry for students without these documents.

-- Announcing or organizing mandatory tests of Turkmen history, language, and culture, for non-ethnic Turkmen students planning to take the FLEX test.

-- Openly telling non-ethnic Turkmen students who passed to the second round that they would not be allowed to participate in the program and pre-registering students so that only those registered by their schools were allowed to attend the FLEX test.

-- Holding last-minute compulsory student activities on the day of FLEX testing, such as academic "Olympiads."

-- Threatening students with expulsion for participation or suspected participation in the FLEX test, even if the test was on a Sunday.

-- Threatening to fire students' teachers or parents if the student participated in testing.

-- Attempting to prevent entry to students from rural areas or students who were poorly dressed/appeared to be poor or from rural areas.

-- Removing or attempting to remove students already screened and approved by ACCELS staff from the testing room.

-- Verbally harassing/discouraging students waiting to enter testing.

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-- Claiming that the FLEX program would force children to join American religious sects and/or that those who pass would not be allowed to enter Turkmen universities, or be employed in TurkQnistan as a result of their participation in the FLEX program

When compared with Round I turnout during 2005-06 recruitment, participation this year dropped dramatically in Turkmenabat (54 percent down), Ruhabat and Tejen (51 percent down), and Balkanabat (40 percent down), with rises in Turkmenbashy (up 69 percent); Mary (up 10 percent); Dashoguz (up 36 percent); and Ashgabat (up 36 percent).

BATTLE TO BEGIN RECRUITMENT A TASTE OF WHAT WAS TO COME

¶3. (U) As in previous years, embassy submitted a request for permission to conduct Round I and II FLEX testing in autumn, and as in previous years the Ministry of Education delayed its permission until the last possible moment, following weeks of daily requests from PAO and Charge for recruitment to commence. In the interim, ACCELS advertised through a series of information sessions held at the American Corners and through word of mouth. Finally, the government "approved" the program (which has operated virtually unchanged for over 10 years) via diplomatic note 09/5242n of November 24. The government issued diplomatic note 09/6347n on November 27, 2006 requesting a cap of a total of 50 students be accepted to the program. Embassy has not responded to the note, but in discussions with MOE and MFA has rejected the idea of a cap. Upon receipt of the diplomatic note approving the program, ACCELS immediately began recruiting in the regions outside Ashgabat.

¶4. (U) Following last year's practice, post sent at least one embassy representative to each testing site in order to deter government intimidation of the applicants, their families and teachers. This presence dampened some host government harassment of participants at the testing sites, but post heard reports from all sites but one -- Mary -- that many interested students never even approached the testing site because of threats they received a day or more prior to the test.

Balkan Welayat

¶15. (U) The first round of testing took place in Turkmenbashy City and Balkanabat in Balkan Welayat (province) on November 29 and 30. Host government interference was apparent from the outset, and included a systematic attempt to discriminate against Balkan students based on their ethnicity. In advance of the testing, embassy learned from ACCELS that students in Balkan Welayat were being told by their schools that only Turkmen speakers with reference letters from their schools could participate in the first round of English language testing for FLEX. School directors were instructed to notify their students that those participating in the FLEX test without a reference would get disciplinary action for missing classes at school and for not obeying the director's instructions. Supposedly, all students who had a good academic performance were given references by their schools regardless of nationality, but some non-ethnic Turkmen students reported that they had to beg their school directors and/or teachers to give them a reference. Education officials in both Turkmenbashy and Balkanabat told embassy FSN that these requirements resulted from direct instructions from MOE. Students and teachers reported that school officials had gathered non-ethnic Turkmen students and told them that they in particular would be prohibited from taking the test.

¶16. (U) Embassy has also learned of widespread, internal MOE screening for FLEX in Balkanabat. In some schools, the deputy principals, a Turkmen language teacher, a Turkmen history teacher and a Ruhnama teacher tested non-Turkmen students' knowledge of Turkmen language, history and Ruhnama. (Ethnic Turkmen students were not tested in this way. It is unclear whether "failing" these tests kept non-Turkmen from participating in the FLEX testing.) The Balkan Welayat Department of Education tried to prevent students with "satisfactory" marks (3 or similar to a "C") and below, in Turkmen language, from participating in FLEX test.

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¶17. (U) At both Balkan testing sites, embassy and ACCELS staff witnessed groups of teachers and school administrators trying to prevent anyone who did not speak Turkmen and without a reference letter from participating in the test. In a couple of cases, directors of schools entered the testing room and tried to prevent students without reference letters from taking the test; when they were told by embassy and ACCELS staff that no references were needed for the test, they then tried to harass those students by saying that they would have a separate "talk" at school next day. Embassy continued to receive reports of harassment even after the testing, with several Round II participants reporting that their teachers told them they would not be allowed to go to the United States on FLEX because of their ethnicity.

¶18. Embassy personnel in Turkmenbashy and Balkanabat engaged throughout the day with welayat and/or city Department of Education officials, school administrators, and parents and students to combat misinformation and physically ensure that students could reach and stay in the testing rooms. ACCELS staff held additional Round I tests in Turkmenbashy and in Balkanabat to accommodate large numbers of students in the latter case and late arrivals who had been prevented through threats from attending the morning Round I test.

MARY -- AN ISLAND OF COMPARATIVE CALM

¶19. POLOff and POL/ECON FSN accompanied ACCELS to testing in Mary City on December 4, though their main role became herding the excited students into lines and ensuring that the many students who turned out for Round I were able to take the Round I test in one of the four shifts held throughout the day. Programming and recruitment in Mary was been relatively problem-free compared to other regions.

AHAL: SHOWDOWN IN A GHOST TOWN

¶10. (U) Testing in Ahal Welayat took place over two days, on December 6 in Tejen and December 8 in Ruhabat, and the low turnout bore the marks of MOE interference. A/DCM and POL/ECON FSN attended the Tejen testing, while Charge, CAO, and POL/ECON FSN attended the testing in Ruhabat; the Charge also met with the local district governor and national and local education officials on December 8. A representative from the Ahal educational department directly told the ACCELS Country Director that school administrators pre-selected students for the FLEX test according to whether they demonstrated good behavior and good English skills. He said that the move was intended to "help" ACCELS recruit only those students who would best represent their country.

¶11. (U) In Tejen, students reported to ACCELS that they had been instructed by their teachers that producing a "maglumat" and/or pre-registering to attend the testing were ACCELS requirements. (Comment: The "maglumat" is a document, similar to the Third Reich-period Aryan racial purity Ahnenpass, tracing one's Turkmen genealogy back three generations; it is a required document when applying to university and for state employment. End Comment.) One student in Tejen was intercepted within the school doors and directed to the school administrator's office, where, because he could not produce his maglumat he was sent home; A/DCM found him outside and escorted him back to the testing room.

¶12. (U) For the Ruhabat testing, post received reports from parents, students and teachers from various schools in the town's larger neighbor, Abadan, that the city's schools would be holding mandatory Olympiad tryouts on December 8. Post heard that those students who called in sick would be reprimanded, on assumption that they were taking the FLEX test, and that the teachers of participating students would be fired. Students who appeared for testing in Ruhabat confirmed that they were attending in violation of their school directors' and teachers' orders. Most of the three dozen participating students -- of which only four were female -- came from the Turkmen-Turkish High School. Following the morning Round I test, the school director demanded the list of all students who participated in Round I, in violation of ACCELS policy.

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¶13. (U) Charge personally appealed to the students, parents, teachers and MOE representatives present for Round I in Ruhabat to tell their interested friends that they could come for Round I later in the day, if they needed to, and that they were welcome to test in Ashgabat on December 17. During her subsequent meeting, MOE, MFA and school officials insisted there had been no effort to disrupt the testing and gently suggested that "perhaps this year there was less interest in going to America." Charge replied that a 50% drop in interest in the FLEX program over the course of the year was a statistical impossibility. Rather, she said, the government was making a concerted effort to prevent children from applying.

¶14. (U) In a separate meeting with the Ruhabat District Governor, Amansoltan Mahmudova, Charge said she was surprised and disappointed to see so few children from the president's own birthplace applying for the program. Charge encouraged Mahmudova to have a strong showing of Ruhabat Etrap applicants during the December 17 testing in Ashgabat.

MORE FROM THE TOWN THAT BANS HALLOWEEN

¶15. (U) Government harassment reached its most dramatic form on December 10-11 during testing in Turkmenabat City, Turkmenistan's second most populous city after Ashgabat. Historically a difficult area for post programming, the local education representative, Kerimberdi Masyrypov, has been especially nasty toward the American Corner and its partners in the past two years (reftel).

¶16. (U) Fewer than half the usual number of students turned out for Round I testing on Sunday, December 10; ACCELS learned that many students had been asked to sign a form promising not to participate in FLEX; that their parents had been threatened with firing if their children participated; and that schools threatened to lower

students' grades and fire individual teachers if students participated. Moreover, after ACCELS set a date for testing in Turkmenabat, a mandatory all-city, all-subject Olympiad was scheduled for December 10. As a result, fewer than 130 students took the first round test; Turkmenabat's seven-year average for Round I turnout is 238 students.

¶17. (U) Before the arrival of ACCELS and embassy representatives, Masyrypov barred test takers, their parents, as well as ACCELS-designated test proctors from entering the building. He also announced to parents that FLEX would send their children to join religious sects in the United States. Under his direction, local Education Department officials sought to inspect all birth certificates (instead of ACCELS) and to prevent parents from attending the ACCELS pre-test presentation. These issues were overcome, yet PAO and PD FSN observed teachers verbally harassing and trying to convince waiting students to leave.

¶18. (U) ACCELS announced additional Round I tests for Monday December 11 -- a plan Ministry of Education representative Nury Bayramov verbally endorsed in two separate phone calls with PAO. However, Bayramov reportedly never passed on this message, leading Masyrypov to bar students interested in Round I from entering the school on the 11th.

¶19. (U) December 11 testing for round II hit major resistance from local officials led by Masyrypov. After officials barred parents from listening to the pre-Round II announcement, ACCELS decided to give its presentation outside the school entrance. Given restrictions on movement and the intimidation at the school, ACCELS conducted additional, limited testing at the American Corner. The American Corner was visited first by Masyrypov, then later by two local officials demanding to inspect the premises, who then forced three of four students to leave a round II test; the fourth student left of her own accord out of fear. Several other interested students who arrived hoping to take the test were turned away. Local officials threatened an ACCELS staff member at the American Corner, and later at her home, with unspecified Ministry of National Security (MNB) action.

DASHOGUZ - NUMBERS UP, DESPITE HARRASSMENT

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¶20. (U) A/DCM and PD FSN attended testing in Dashoguz on December 13, where the numbers were up despite stories that most children in the city had been warned the day before by their school directors not to attend testing. ACCELS learned that at least three children in particular who had been preparing for the test were stopped from attending. During the day A/DCM stopped a school director from trying to remove one child from the testing because he did not have a recommendation letter; shortly afterwards, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provincial government and the municipal education department arrived, and A/DCM talked to them, stressing U.S. interest in ensuring that testing be transparent and non-discriminatory. As at the other testing sites, several students arrived after school hours because they had not been able to obtain permission to come during the day.

ASHGABAT

¶21. (U) Charge's months-long request for a meeting with Minister of Education Shemshat Annagylyjova finally was granted at the last hour of Friday, December 15, the last working day of the FLEX testing period. During this meeting, the Charge and PAO pushed for a cancellation of the Ashgabat city-wide Olympiad scheduled for Sunday, December 17 (during Ashgabat Round I testing). The minister relented only by canceling the Olympiad for the test site, School ¶15. The Charge also warned that a high-level State Department official would be sending a letter to President Niyazov protesting MOE interference in this year's FLEX program recruitment. She said only MOE agreement to retest in Balkanabat, Turkmenabat, Tejen and Ruhabat could prevent this letter. Charge also noted that many of these problems could have been averted if Annagylyjova had agreed to

meet earlier in the process and if the process had been approved two months earlier, as the embassy had requested. Annagylyjova responded that she had been too busy with the second opening of the Turkmen Fairy Tales amusement park to meet. (Comment: The \$50 million MOE-funded complex had its first opening a month earlier for Independence Day, but MOE had been unable to train park operators sufficiently to keep the park open. The park "reopened" as part of the DeQmber 11 Neutrality Day activities). She admitted that MOE was pre-screening for Turkmen ethnic purity and also that the Olympiads had been scheduled for the same dates as the FLEX testing, but denied there had been any written or oral instruction for MOE officials to disrupt the testing. After Annagylyjova accused Charge of spreading rumors and false information, Charge responded with a quote from Annagylyjova to President Niyazov when accepting her new duty as Rector of Turkmen-Turkish University: "I promise to work honestly." Charge noted that that was how she served her president and she expected Annagylyjova to do the same.

¶22. (U) Charge saw Foreign Minister Meredov later that evening at Kazakhstani National Day and alerted him to the State Department letter. She noted her meeting with Minister Annagylyjova was too little, too late, and said that there was nothing she could do to stop the letter, absent government agreement to retest at Balkanabat, Turkmenabat, Tejen and Ruhabat. Meredov implored Charge to act "wisely," and said he was certain we could find a solution.

¶23. (U) As expected, there was no interference from school or ministry officials at the Ashgabat testing site on December 17, although students trickled in throughout the day as they snuck out of Olympiads or finished their Olympiads early. ACCELS opted to score all tests immediately, leaving no opportunity for MOE interference on Monday, and began three days of Round II testing on December 19. The last Ashgabat Round II test date, December 20, is also a make-up test date for the children in Turkmenabat who were kicked out of their Round II test. The Ashgabat testing site usually draws four to five times the numbers at other sites, and is open to students from all regions. This year post was hoping for higher numbers of regional participants -- only about 6% came from outside Ashgabat and those numbers did not include students ACCELS knew had been intQidated from testing at their home testing sites.

COMMENT

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¶24. (SBU) The fiasco in Turkmenabat demonstrates that the host government will continue to use any means to disrupt FLEX testing. The host government may be hoping the higher turnout in Ashgabat will assuage post's efforts to demand re-testing, but post is convinced that this year's bullying is only a prelude to difficulties in Round III and beyond. For example, MOE still is insisting on a cap of 50 students. While our Ministry of Foreign Affairs interlocutors express concern about post's protests and Department's reinforcement through Turkmenistan Ambassador Orazov, the host government has done nothing to improve the situation. Two individuals in particular have defined themselves as human rights violators by practicing blatant discrimination against Turkmenistan's minorities: MFA's Nury Bayramov and MOE's Turkmenabat representative, Kerimberdy Masyrypov. Moreover, as the Minister of Education repeatedly dodged post's requests for a meeting to discuss the situation until the "final hour" before the last scheduled FLEX test, only a threat to go directly to President Niyazov reduced -- but did not eliminate entirely -- interference in the Ashgabat testing. MOE once again tried to force the 50-student cap, which embassy has steadfastly rejected. Post will continue to demand that ACCELS be permitted to retest in Turkmenabat, Ahal Welayat, and Balkanabat, where student numbers were lowest and intimidation most egregious. End Comment.

BRUSH